

The Oxford Union Society and its Postage

By Jon Johnson (LM 28)

The Oxford Union Society in Oxford, England, has long been credited with originating the concept of deterring the pilferage of postage stamps. The Society was a Club where members of the University could maintain a private Debating Hall, Library, Reading and Smoking Rooms, and notably for us, a Writing Room. Any domestic letters written and posted in the Writing Room by members had the postage applied by the Society. As the use of postage stamps grew, the Society sought to reduce losses in postage stamps that could not be accounted for.

Around 1858 (the year varies by source) the Post Office approved the Society's request to 'overprint' its initials on the face of the Penny Red stamps they purchased. Perkins, Bacon & CO., the stamp printers, applied the approved overprint in the same ink as used to print the stamps. The space between the wavy lines was 2.5 mm. The OUS overprint was the only overprint approved by the Post Office until 1903 when regulations relating to overprints were relaxed.

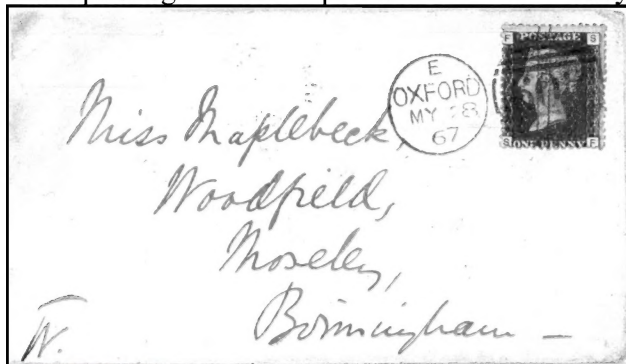


In Color



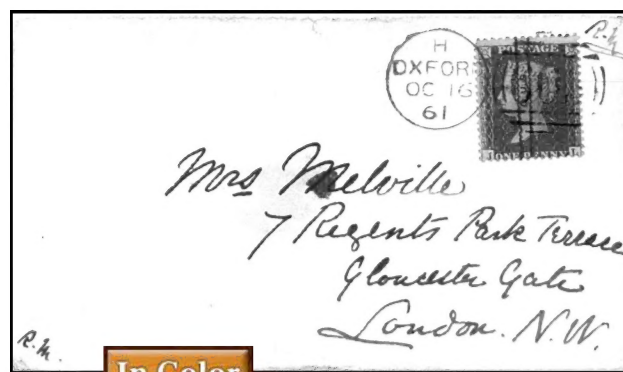
In Color

In 1866, J.C. Boyd & Co. also wished to protect their postage. In this case the Post Office approved the printing on the back of the stamp, 'underprinting'. The procedure was fairly



In Color

convoluted. First, payment for the order, minimum of 100 Pounds (24,000 1 penny stamps) was sent to the Post Office (Somerset House). The Stamping Department then issued an order authorizing Perkins, Bacon to print the required underprint on the stamps. Perkins, Bacon took printed sheets of stamps from their unfinished stock, printed the underprint (same ink as the stamps), gummed the sheets and sent them to the Post Office, where if approved, the sheets were perforated by the Government machines. Perkins, Bacon collected the finished sheets and sent them to the customer with an invoice of 5 shillings per 100 sheets for printing the underprint.



In Color

In 1870 the Society's authorization for their overprint was withdrawn and they had to change to the underprint using the procedure above. In order to underprint postage a stereotyping metal form was required. At a cost of 5 Pounds, the Society ordered the form January 11, 1871. The new form had a 3.5 mm space between the wavy lines. The initial order of 97 underprinted sheets was shipped January 30, 1871, short 13 sheets which were shipped February 1, 1871. Perkins, Bacon's records show that from 1873 through 1877 the Society ordered about 300 Pounds of Postage (74,000 1 penny stamps) per year.



In Color

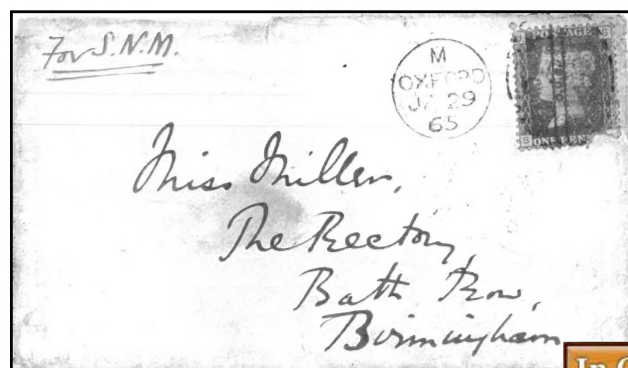


In Color



In Color

In January 1880 the Society placed an order for postage with Perkins, Bacon that they were unable to do as they no longer were the stamp printers. Messrs. De La Rue were now doing the stamp printing. The De La Rue sheets had a space between the panes of 120 stamps so the existing underprinting form no longer fit the sheet of stamps. It appears from the reports that for a few months the Society had its postage underprinted, on top of the gum. As the space between the lines is 2.5 mm this may be the overprint form back in use. Then for the next year or so stamps underprinted using the 2.5 mm form, before the gum was applied, were available to the Society.



In Color

Then in late 1882 the use of the OUS underprint ceased. No explanation can be found for the policy change. Interestingly the Society never did adopt Joseph Sloper's security procedure of perforating their postage stamps. So the Society with the overprinted stamps credited as the forerunner to perfin never had a perfin.

References:

- The Stamp-Collector's Magazine, June 1864.
- English Specialists' Journal, May 1897.
- The College Stamps of Oxford and Cambridge, 1904.
- Perkins, Bacon & Co. Records, Royal Philatelic Society 1953.
- Stanley Gibbons Specialized Catalogue.